Development Code: “Manhattan Project”

Pretext written by Yamada Orochi

We must descend—.

Calendar year 2002, a summer of plunge and magic.

It boils down to this.

We wanted to make contact with the truth.

We wanted to adorn it with all sorts of footnotes, layer upon layer of theory, until it reached great heights…

Fine words that nobody would dare sneer at.

But that’s what we were searching for.

A simple, solid answer.

In other words—we wanted to make contact with the truth.

“We must descend,” Kumoi Natane said.

And so we did.

Deeply.

Deeply.

Deeply into ourselves.

Into others.

Into the world. The farther we sank, the closer the truth came.

If it didn’t exist anywhere, we kept descending into the well of our souls in search of that fact.

Some refer to our quest at a “folie à deux.”

On TV.

In magazines.

On the internet.

We were portrayed as characters in a cautionary tale.

—Let's be honest. Objectively speaking, we hurt many that shouldn't have been hurt.

We damaged the fabric of society.

And above all, we damaged ourselves beyond repair.

Those involved in this incident will likely bear the burden for years to come.

Perhaps their wounds are fatal.

We misstepped.

We failed.

We made poor choices.

Still, I insist.

Our story is one of miracles.

If the word "miracle" sounds too religiously connotative, then let's put it into layman's terms: magic.

That summer, I witnessed real magic, time and time again.

I studied closely with real magicians.

—-Let's be honest. Objectively speaking, we failed in many places.

But I made the best possible decision in others.

Didn't I?

Hey, didn't I?

Everything that happened that summer exists within a dizzying, hallucinatory vacuum.

Calendar year 2002.

Summer.

I understood it all.

Things of value.

Things of beauty.

Things of meaning.

They shimmered just beyond the reach of my outstretched hand.

I thought I could grasp them.

But in the end, I couldn't.

Tsukishiro Eiko would likely reassure me.

"It's okay. Someday, for sure–"

That's what it boils down to.

We wanted to touch the truth.

That is how I describe the summer of calendar year 2002.

But something was missing back then.

Light, wind, sound–things that can't be bottled.

I can no longer touch them, nor can I tell their story.

They shimmer just beyond the reach of my outstretched hand.

Please, God.

Please. Don't take any more from me.

The Doomsday Calendar

February 3, 2001.

Imasaki Koji (28, unemployed) found the following information on the Internet.

The menstrual cycle is as follows.

The hypothalamus secretes a gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH). This hormone causes the pituitary gland to produce luteinizing hormones (LH) and follicle-stimulating hormones (FSH).

Follicle-stimulating hormones are secreted into the ovaries, causing some follicles to enlarge and release estrogen. Estrogen induces growth of the endometrium (commonly referred to as uterine lining), which thickens in preparation for the possible implantation of an embryo.

Enlarged follicles rupture as luteinizing hormones trigger the release of an ovum (egg) from the ovary.

This is called “ovulation.”

After an ovum is discharged, the corpus luteum (a hormone-secreting cyst) is formed in the ovary. Progesterone is secreted from the cyst, which causes the endometrium to soften in preparation for pregnancy. If pregnancy does not occur, the endometrium will detach approximately two weeks after ovulation. This is called "menstruation."

The menstrual cycle is generally 28 to 35 days long for most women of child-bearing age. Regardless of cycle length, ovulation occurs 12 to 16 days before the next expected menstrual period.

Over the next year, Imasaki Koji quietly collected the Y family's trash from the dumpster. He combed through each bag, carefully picking out every used sanitary pad he could find.

With clear cellophane tape, Koji stuck each pad to his bedroom walls. The walls gradually became marred with the pink, red and black of his secret trophies. Through the menstrual cycles of his neighbors, Koji had created what he called “the Doomsday Calendar.”
Failure was not an option.

He only had one chance to save the world. His calendar was the key to humanity’s salvation, but nobody was willing to believe him. As a result, Koji endured isolation.

Not that it was a problem. He was a solitary man by nature. For more than five years, his bedroom was his world. Within those four walls, Koji accepted his fate of loneliness and found comfort in it. In being alone.

Loneliness was a fate designated since birth. Like the color of one's skin or the hereditary disease nestled in their bones, no one could choose who they are.

Appearance is subject to the brush of change, but the rains of time always wash it away. Making peace with the true self is the essence of life itself.

The burden of Koji's mission drove him even further into loneliness. He began to fear it.

"I'm the Tank." Koji muttered to himself in his decaying bedroom.

I'm the Tank.

Squeak squeak squeak!

That's it! Don't ask anymore questions!

Koji settled on the date of his attack.

One day, he broke into the house of the Y family and subsequently tied up all three of the children. A daughter, the eldest; a brother, the middle child; and a sister, the youngest.

He began by holding the oldest daughter at knifepoint, demanding that she suck her brother's dick. She refused, only to scream in horror as Koji stabbed her little sister in the shoulder. Both girls screamed and the oldest sobbed her compliance in an instant.

Her little brother became erect in no time.

He hurriedly came into his sister's mouth.

Koji was furious.

He kicked the brother in the stomach. As the boy writhed on the floor in pain, Koji sneered at the oldest girl and held out his hand.

"We have to give it to the little one."

The girl hesitantly let the mouthful dribble onto Koji's palm.

Koji dug his thumb into the stab wound on the younger sister's shoulder and twisted.

“Hurry up already! The Tank is going to break!”

The deed was done with a small pipette.

The younger girl, with tears in her eyes, dropped her brother’s semen from the pipette into her mouth then spat it into her sister’s pussy. Their sobs echoed in the dark living room. Koji furiously masturbated to the insemination scene and came all over the crown of the younger girl’s head. He ruffled the mess into her hair, then declared:

“Alright. Now it’s your turn.”

“Please!” The oldest cried. “I’ll do anything, just please let her go!”

That’s when Koji struck a deal with the family.

“If you make your little brother come so much that he can’t get hard for an hour, I’ll let her go.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” The girl whispered as she straddled her brother and began to ride him. In seemingly no time, two thick pumps of semen shot into her womb. Their bodies made a strange squishy sound where they were connected.

Wetness and semen oozed together and splattered against their skin with each slap of their bodies against each other.

After forty minutes, the girl pulled her brother out of her, having lost momentum. She used her hands, breasts, lips and tongue to make him erect again.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…”

She steadied his length with her hands and climbed back on top. The air between them hissed faintly when she sat back down. They kissed as they were ordered to, dehydrated tongues twining, saliva staining their chins. Saliva ended up smearing onto the girl’s cheeks and lower jaw as she moved and bowed her head in shame. Both were drenched in sweat, their tired bodies glistening under the fluorescent lights. The youngest girl was ordered to masturbate while watching her brother and sister copulate. Koji gouged his thumb into her wound whenever she dared to look away or stop.

The boy ended up climaxing five times in the span of an hour.

His dick, soft and lifeless upon pulling out of his sister, seemed to have lost its vigor.

“Alright! Let’s test if you can get hard again.”

Koji held up the younger sister from behind and spread her legs. Her panties were damp, a faint outline of her pussy imprinted on the fabric.

“If you get hard, you gotta fuck her.”

Koji slowly stroked her through her panties while explaining the texture to the family. She had already run out of tears to cry, left stunned and helpless from the attack. The older girl was similarly motionless on the floor, staring at the ceiling as if she wasn’t even there.

A thin string of wetness clung to the fabric when her panties were pulled away. Koji stroked her pubic hair, admiring how it’d dampened with the heat.

“This is a good opportunity. Let’s learn about women with your little sister’s xxx.”

Koji grabbed the boy by his collar and pressed him between his sister’s legs. He then eased apart the girl’s lips and meticulously explained her anatomy to nobody in particular. The boy became erect yet again.

“Ha! Looks like you wanna fuck her.”

Koji laughed.

He ordered the older girl to aid in the loss of her little sister’s virginity.

“Show her how it’s done so she doesn’t die from the pain.”

The older girl no longer disobeyed. The younger one got on her knees and straddled her older brother as he laid on his back. The older girl guided their brother’s dick to her sister’s entrance. “Are you ready? Just wiggle it into you a few times then push a little harder. As far as you can go. Then slide up and down, just like that,” she advised.

The younger girl reluctantly did as she was told.

The girl’s older sister watched carefully for signs of discomfort as she gradually began to wiggle her hips.

“On the count of three.” The older girl supported her little sister’s shoulders with her hands.

“One… two… three.”

She sank her weight down with a shove.

The younger girl screamed in pain and froze. Her brother's dick was sheathed right up to the base, firmly in her womb. She trembled wordlessly and breathed raggedly through tears dripping down her flushed cheeks.

Her lips parted to speak, but nothing was said. Drool seeped out from her lips, easing down the small valley of her chest until it eventually dripped onto her brother's chest. Imasaki Koji had successfully impregnated both girls of the Y family with the semen of a blood relative.

With this, Koji could finally rest knowing he'd preserved the fine genetics of the Y family. The procreation of blood-related siblings was considered a serious taboo in modern society. This, however, was complete nonsense. The divine power of karma dispelling was fruitless with impure blood. To have impure blood was a waste of potential, a loss for humanity.

The prosperity of humanity—the future—is protected by Koji, the Tank!

Koji laughed maniacally as he stabbed the knife into his stomach.

"I am the Tank!!"

He stabbed himself twenty-five times before succumbing to his injuries.

Squeak squeak squeak!

Unbeknownst to Koji, his mission was meaningless.

All three members of the Y family were adopted. Not blood related.

The moral of the story is this; life is a joke with no punchline.

——That's just how it is.

The Car That Drove to the Edge of the Earth

The radio station host speaks.

“Blue is gonna be really in this winter.”

The topic makes my mind slide in odd directions.

It takes me somewhere uncomfortable.
Outside the window it’s 94 degrees. The arrival of winter lay somewhere far beyond the accordion-like folds of heat. Summer.

The perfect summer is out there. I don’t mean that symbolically or poetically. The perfect, simplest, realest summer is out there. The kind of summer that drifts behind you at 55 miles an hour when you’re in the fast lane.

Yet the guy on the radio predicts, “Blue is gonna be really in this winter”.

Gimme a break, I think.

Like most things we surround ourselves with, fashion trends are predetermined.

“Blue is gonna be really in this winter.”

This isn’t mere prediction. It’s scheduled.

Tapping my fingers on the steering wheel—*thump, thump, thump*—I think about the conflict between determinism and free will. I wonder if I’d get a much-deserved ego boost out of solving a problem so severe. Just for a little while, of course.

Time for a cigarette. If you think about it, we’re all gonna end up where we’re supposed to be because everything is already planned for us.

It’s scheduled, just like winter’s trends.

Alright, everyone.

Let’s rock.

I change the radio station.
The announcer’s voice fades into blaring guitars that cut through the speakers. It’s an old protest song, too folksy to be considered real rock music.

Oh well, I think.

This is fine. It's probably better to drive to something other than my own existential thoughts. Yes. Everything is a matter of comparison. Which one is better? Which one can you tolerate longer? Choices can be limited and meaningless sometimes. Imagine having to choose which is more poetic; vomit or excrement? Meaningless/limited/choice. *Thump/thump/thump.*

Who killed Riley R.?
Why? What was the motive?
Fifteen magicians said to me,
"Listen up, Young Dylan.
Life is like a rolling stone.
A series of uncontrollable tragedies.
There's not much we can do about it.
Hey, Dylan.
Riley R. had no choice but to go down the Lost Highway."

Here's the rundown.

F prefecture. It's a three hour drive from Tokyo.

We (me and my car, that is) are going about 55 miles an hour on the highway. It's a straight shot. Nobody around for miles. Reminds me of Carl Lewis.

Desolate scenery stretches along both sides of the highway. Everything's covered in whitish gravel. No trees, no fields, not a single blade of grass. No traffic lights, no convenience stores, no flashy traffic signs—Dylan, are you listening? Not a single traffic sign, I said.

"The seatbelt/hugs/the heart and body". Meaningless in its purest form. We don't entertain such nonsense here. 100 percent wilderness. I drove by an abandoned nuclear power plant half an hour ago.

It must have been closed for a while. The energy it possessed is probably long gone by now. Sanitized and bleached out, like a pair of jeans. Reminds me of this big dying beast I saw. The animal heaved a big painful sigh then died a moment later. Its body is both a corpse and a tombstone.

What a gloomy scene… time seemed to have died with it. Everything was still. Huddled up, holding its breath. The sky was dark and gray as black clouds whirred by.

Nice Nice Lost Highway Hey Hang on tight, silly goose
Nice Nice Lost Highway
Hey Hold onto the steering wheel

—The end of the world.

I think of the phrase. I taste it on my tongue and try saying it aloud.

“The end of the world.”

Not bad.

It sounds nice in my car driving 55 miles an hour down the summer highway.

Lyrical.

Poetically lyrical and popping like candy.

LYRICAL and POP-y WORLD’S END—

“The end of the world.”

But the second time I say it out loud, it’s not lyrical or pop-y. The magic is gone. It just feels blank and empty.

Why?

Of course the end of the world is nowhere in sight—that, I’m aware of.

The end of the world is the final frontier. We have no choice but to continue life there. At that point, the end of the world is just “somewhere other than here.” Every time we reach the end of the world, the mystery (or what we might call its “endlessness”) is lost.

One step forward and one step ahead. It’s just beyond my outstretched hand but just outside of my reach.

Perhaps we’re at the end of the world without a fixed point.

We move forward. Forward towards the end of the world. Like Achilles who never catches up with the tortoise, we will never reach the end of the world. We can’t catch ourselves and we can’t outrun ourselves either.

It’s as hard as curling or a triathlon.

In other words, it’s realistic.

Gimme a break.

Karmic Cleansing

“I used to love the town of Ochanomizu.

If you venture a bit further, places like Akihabara or Korakuen Amusement park are bustling, but I preferred Ochanomizu’s quietness.

It’s not a particularly distinctive town, but if you walk a little ways from the main street, you’ll find places like St. Nicholas’ Cathedral. I loved the atmosphere around there. It’s like a sophisticated countryside, or perhaps a rustic city. There’s still a fair amount of greenery left. Ah, but I don’t need to tell you that. You’re from Tokyo.

No matter where you are, there’s a certain atmosphere that’s unique to each place. It’s a matter of whether that wavelength resonates with you or not.

Ochanomizu was just right. Speaking of which, I once had a conversation with a friend about a town’s ‘color.’ Ikebukuro is blue. Akihabara is red–I wonder why.

Because of all the red neon lights? Ahaha… We didn’t agree on much, but managed to agree that Ochanomizu is ‘green.’ It was a perfect fit. I remember that.

There are a lot of hills around the area, especially as you get closer to JR Suidobashi Station, so a bicycle isn’t of much use. So I got a moped license. It was during summer vacation in my first year of college. My range of movement expanded. With this, I could go anywhere. I would ride around aimlessly. When I got hot, I’d duck into a bookstore. I’d read a book and wait for the sweat to dry…

I’m not much of a reader. Bestsellers and informational magazines are as far as I go. And even then, I only read them occasionally. Sorry.

Tokyo’s like a ghost town at night, isn’t it?

It’s so lively and crowded during the day, yet completely devastated at night. It felt like the aftermath of a festival, and I hated that. It made me sad. I once went to a drinking party in Shinjuku and missed the last train, so I walked home, but it was lonely. I nearly cried. I felt down, like I was the last man standing after a nuclear apocalypse. The convenience stores were open. But their fluorescent lights seemed somewhat insincere. I felt detached. I realized I was alone.

But that’s not how Ochanomizu nights are.

Of course, nobody was out and about, but it was quiet. Not an unpleasant quiet. It was refreshing, dignified, even–not just the coda to daytime. It was gentle.

The rent wasn't cheap. But my parents sent me money. I covered half of the 60,000 yen with that. The rest came from my part-time job. My friends kept advising me to move somewhere along the train line.

Part of me still loves Ochanomizu.

I was on my way to work at a coffee shop called xxx in Shinjuku. It's the kind of coffee shop that salarymen use for meetings–yeah yeah, laugh it up. Everyone made fun of me, calling me old-fashioned. I take the Chuo Line and it's always late. Accidents happen. I don't know what happened that day, but it stopped just before Yoyogi. I think it was stalled for about ten minutes.

…No, it was daytime, so it wasn't too crowded. That wasn't the issue. I was panicking because I wouldn't make it to work on time. I'm very punctual. I've never been late once. I really hate tardiness. Like, a lot. It's not that I'm particularly meticulous or anything, but I am when it comes to time. So I was freaking out.

Then, something splattered across my chest.

At first, I thought I'd been hit by a baseball. It felt like more of a solid than a liquid. But it was wet, so I thought, oh, this must be paint or something. I was wearing a brand new white T-shirt–and I was pissed, thinking, what the hell is this guy's problem? So I glared at the kid sitting in front of me, only to find that he was looking at me, too. Our eyes met. He was a boy, probably a high-schooler. A sudden fear washed over me. I thought he was going to hit me or something. I don't know why.

For some reason, he was bright red. From the nape of his neck to his pants, he was coated red. Blood was spurting from his throat. Like a sprinkler… Oh my God! Blood!

My hand gripping the dangling train strap froze solid. I couldn't move.

So I screamed. 'Help me! I'm stuck! Please help me!' The people around me seemed to snap back to reality at the sound of my voice. I heard screams, people retching and fleeing to the next car. I was paralyzed. Eyes closed, screaming, 'Help me! Help me! Help me!'

Suddenly, something clung to me.

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest.

I opened my eyes reflexively.

That blood-soaked boy had risen from his seat and grabbed hold of me.
Gush, gush, gush…

A voice spoke into my ear.

‘What?’ I squeaked.

‘NEVER FORGET THIS!’ boomed the voice.”

xxx

My client fell into a deep silence after finishing her tale. Her gaze remained fixed on the mug sitting on the table.

The coffee inside had grown cold, a faint film wrinkling its surface. The table and sofa, likely brought from Tokyo, were tasteful and stylish. The bright orange and yellow furniture clashed terribly with her Japanese-style home, seeming almost otherworldly. They were things that didn’t belong. Certainly not here. There was a certain sadness affixed to them. The air conditioner was too high. The room felt like an alcohol cooler.

Having finished speaking, she looked terribly aged.

It had only been two hours since she greeted me, made me coffee, and sat down on the sofa. She stared intently at the mug. Really, she was staring past it. Her eyes were blank. There was a gaping darkness, like the bottomless pit of a well.

I thought to myself that she must have been a charming woman in reality.

The kind of woman who the people of Ochanomizu smiled at in the gaps of sunlight through the spring trees. But now, stripped of her virtue, she looked inhuman. She was dry and wasting away, like a pitiful mummy. And that was the curse the Church of Werewolf Reincarnation had placed on her.

The Church of Werewolf Reincarnation.

What a cheap name. They had no church to call their own, nor did they believe in reincarnation. They weren’t even werewolves (of course).

The utter pretentiousness of that name spoke volumes of their fundamental cheapness. To top it off, they were solely based online. The cyber-cult, the Church of Werewolf Reincarnation. Give me a break. And then, in the summer of 2002–at precisely noon on July 1st–the werewolves simultaneously slit their throats in various locations around Japan.

“Young men and women who’ve never met–”

“Ended their lives at the same time, as if meeting for a date.”

“Feeling uneasy about superficial communication via cell phones–”

“Unable to empathize with a society rife with lies–”

“Found psuedo-community in cyberspace–”

“And to solidify their eternal bonds, resorted to death–”

The ‘werewolves’ were ultra-cheap martyrs. They were the typical pietism produced by a typical modern society. Many were shocked and disgusted. “Oh come on,” they thought. “Why are these people so stupid?”

They were foolish. Yet they understood their impact was naught. Their noble sacrifice was unworthy of the attention it received, destined to flow into the gutter of tabloid gossip, reduced to mere garbage.

That’s why they cursed people. If they couldn’t make their mark in society, they’d carve it into individuals, one by one. They slit their throats before strangers.

That boy bore holes into her head and said,

“Never forget this.”

They forced her to partake in their revolution. They wouldn’t let her remain a passerby. They made her an accomplice. They died. But they didn’t become nothing. I don’t know what they were thinking, nor do I want to know. But their sentiment certainly lingered. At least, in the mind of the client staring into the void before me (or perhaps she herself was already the void), it remained deeply engraved into her.

That’s what a curse is.

I placed the attache case on my lap, unlocked it, and withdrew three small bottles. I lined them up on the desk.

The client’s expression faltered.

Could she be mad?

Could I have gone mad, too?

“Rest assured,” I said. “This Lunar Eclipse Karma Water will wash away your sin. It is the sacred water you sought, the water that will cleanse you.

Your impurity–your karma–is considerable. But with this, it can be neutralized. From the looks of it, three bottles should suffice. I'll leave these here. If it isn't enough, call me again and tell me your story."

"Um–"

"Here are the instructions. It's not dangerous, but it won't work if used incorrectly. Read these carefully before using it."

"Um–"

"One bottle is thirty thousand yen."

I flashed a smile.

A dazzling smile I'd practiced countless times in the mirror.

Rest assured.

There is nothing to worry about.

I'll save you.

It's not you who is at fault. It's the impurity. The karma.

Now, let us cleanse.

Let's wash away the karma.

All is well.

Leave it to me, and everything will work out in the end.

Smiling, I think to myself.

I wonder if my sister ever smiled like this…?

My older sister.

She was hanging from a beam with a vinyl rope she'd bought at the 100-yen shop noosed around her neck.

Ahh, I wonder if my sister ever smiled like this, too…?

My sister was the one to pioneer the sale of Lunar Eclipse Karma Water.

She went from one end of large apartment complexes to the other, ringing every doorbell. When she got lucky and someone opened the door, she'd launch into her pitch with a dazzling smile: "Would you like some water?"

"Oh, no, I'm not trying to sell you a water purifier. I'm selling special water that washes away impurities. Just like detergent! You know how they demonstrate German car wax on TV shopping channels? It wipes everything away, just like that. Just between you and me, this is called Lunar Eclipse Karma Water. You know what karma is, right? I'd love to explain it in detail, but… Ahh, it's so hot. Honestly, it's unbearable. Hey, if you don't mind, could I come inside?"

On days when she sold a lot of water, my sister would take me and Riu to a family restaurant. She acted snobby towards the staff. Everyone treated us strangely because of it. I was mortified. I nudged her with my elbow, trying to get her to knock it off, but she never did. She scolded me instead.

"I'm not doing it for her sake! Hey, you know what I'm saying, don't you? I'm talking to you. You can't keep working as a waitress forever. You need to find a line of work that's more useful to society, or you'll never find your purpose. Honestly, come on!"

xxx

My sister started selling Lunar Eclipse Karma Water after our parents died. My mother and father died in a plane crash at 900 kilometers per hour into the Indian Ocean. It was their first overseas trip meant to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. The airline sent us a small box that contained a thin, flat rectangular piece of granite–presumably meant to stand in for their remains. When my parents were young, their first date was a screening of 2001: A Space Odyssey.

The funeral.

I was swamped dealing with relatives, leaving me no time to grieve. My uncle and aunt seemed hesitant to take us in.

It might not be fair to wrap things up by saying we weren't blood-related. Both Riu and I, and our older sister too, were still students back then. Suddenly taking on three students to support is different from suddenly having three babies. It required rewriting life plans and restructuring values. It's no easy task. Anyway–I was busy.

Riu just holed up in her room and cried. My sister sat stiffly before the family portrait, reading the financial newspaper with a blank expression. She stared intently at pages filled with incomprehensible numbers and symbols from the stock market. Eventually, my sister lifted her face and murmured, "I understand. I understand everything now."

xxx

I hated my sister's odd job.

Of course I'm grateful to her for supporting us by selling that fake water. But I never once believed in the so-called 'power' she claimed to possess.

Escapism. I understood that it was a form of escapism. Everyone's scared. They're terrified of living in reality. They want to cling to some dreamlike absurdity–something anti-real. Like a god. Like Lunar Eclipse Karma Water. My sister was a human sacrifice for the weak, though she was just as weak herself. That's what it boiled down to.

I often saw her on sunny evenings buying boxes of 'Natural Spring Water PET Bottles'–six bottles for 600 yen–at the neighborhood discount store. When she noticed me, she smiled shyly and said, "Shin-chan, won't you help me carry these home?"

xxx

Now to support Riu and I, I peddle Lunar Eclipse Karma Water. I fill pretty little bottles with water from the discount store, pack them into a black attache case, and walk the streets.

I don't advertise. I rely on word of mouth. If called, I drive as far as F Prefecture. I listen to their stories. I sell the Lunar Eclipse Karma Water for thirty thousand yen. It's just water. Yet some people cry, claiming they've been saved. Like today's client, some even try to sleep with me. My sister died, Riu miscarried, I sell water. The world keeps spinning and life goes on.

My sister often talked about "God."

"God isn't up in the sky. That's a lie. Religions say that God lives in the sky? They're all fakes. Hehehe. God is inside of us. In my case, well… Dolce was my God. Remember Dolce? Our American Shorthair who passed away. The Dolce that Mom and Dad got for us. She died of pneumonia. Then she became my God. You never know what life may bring. Hey, by the way, Shin-chan. Who's your God?"

My sister's suicide note read:

"I hate God."

xxx

After finishing my karma cleansing and stepping outside, my surroundings had been completely swallowed by night. The blowing wind carried the damp hint of rain, clinging to my skin like wet

washi tape. My car, which had been sealed shut for around three hours, had turned into a makeshift sauna. I started the engine and came to find that the A/C had finally died.

Sigh. It seems like nothing goes my way.

I drove to the station and searched for the shop my client had recommended. Apparently, their grass mochi is delicious. A local delicacy, they said. “Hurry, or the shop will close,” she urged. “Unlike Tokyo, things close early here at night.”

I walked through the small shopping street.

It’s a typical local shopping street in front of a station, and it takes about three minutes to walk from one end to the other.

Grocery store. Butcher shop. Stationery store. Clothing store. Electronics shop. Liquor store. Bike and motorcycle shop. Some stores are in the process of lowering their shutters while others have already finished. Every shop exudes a faint weariness. An air of dull resignation accumulating like sedimentary layers. This shopping street probably looked like this ten years ago, and will probably look like this in ten years’ time. That feeling. The stagnation that begets stagnation. It’s a sense of being trapped, of having nowhere to go.

There are no other shoppers besides myself. I couldn’t find the shop selling grass mochi. Did I miss it? A dog sitting at the edge of the shopping street saw my face, stood slowly, and melted away into the darkness. And so, the shopping street had completely closed for the night.

I was left alone on the deserted station front shopping street. I felt like some sort of plague. I arrive. Shutters close. I leave. Shutters open…

A streetlight bearing the sign “Welcome to Fureai Dori Shopping Street” flickered my shadow across the asphalt. Suddenly, I wondered. If the streetlight went out, would I vanish, too? Looking up, the streetlight flickered on and off with a neurotic hum. Unpleasant insects–flies and moths–swarmed and danced. Then, without warning, a huge wave of emotion crashed over me and shattered my heart.

My legs had turned to splinters. I could barely stand. I stagger to the edge of the road and sit down. I bury my head between my knees. I hold my breath. I’m unbearably cold, sad and scared. What is the meaning of this?

I think. What value is there in this? I’m a con artist at the edge of the world. Connected to no one. Connected to nowhere. I wish I could just get hooked on some cyber cult. I wish I could burden a complete stranger with karma and die immersed in eternal self-satisfaction.

But I’m not that stupid.

“101 Ways to Change Your Life,” “30 Suggestions to Brighten Your Day,” “69 Truths Everyone Knows But Doesn’t Practice”–I’m not shallow enough to be enlightened by such things. I know. The world won’t change with that. Just like how the Lunar Eclipse Karma Water couldn’t save my sister. I know that much.

And yet–

And yet I don’t know how to revolutionize the world. Not weak enough to wallow in it, not strong enough to live. I can’t go anywhere. Even if I could, it’d only be the Lost Highway. The place poor Riley R. had no choice but to go. Inner hell. Or outer hell. Everything is predestined. So then, Young Dylan, what meaning is there in any of this?

It’s okay.

It’s okay. I tell myself. It always is.

This is merely a temporary emotional disturbance. It shall pass. It can’t torment me forever, nor hold me captive. I just need to brace myself and wait for the waves to recede.

Things happen exactly as they should. Minutes later, I’m completely back to normal (or what I believe to be). All that remains is a bit of fatigue and some nasty sweat. Okay. I’m cool. I’m pop.

Okay.

I turn back through the deserted shopping district and ignite the flame of life in the car. And on the way home, I hit Minakami Natsuki at 90 kilometers per hour.

Minakami Natsuki

Or maybe I really did hit Minakami Natsuki at 90 kilometers per hour back then, and the woman who led me to a magical land in the summer of 2002 was a ghost or something. I still think that sometimes.

“I’m alive.”

But Minakami Natsuki, sitting in the passenger seat, gently placed her palm on my knee.

“I’m real. I’m alive.”

Her fingers were slender and long, waxen white. Blue veins faintly traced the back of her hand. Every nail was perfectly manicured. Almost inhumanly so. The hand seemed detached from the inherent subordination and functionality hands are bound to, as if it solely existed on its own, complete in itself. If there was such a thing as a World’s Most Beautiful Hands contest, this would undoubtedly rank first.

“Beautiful hands,” I murmured.

“Beautiful hands,” she repeated. “I don’t mind being complimented on them. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Your lap isn’t bad either.”

“My lap?” I said. “Yours would undoubtedly rank first in a World’s Most Beautiful Knees contest.”

“You’re funny,” she chuckled softly.

The road sank completely into the night, with headlights feebly slicing through (needless to say, the Lost Highway had never heard of streetlights). For an instant, a shadow flitted across the rear window. And then–I’d never hit anyone before, but a shock shook me and my car, reminding me that this is probably what would happen if I did.

Slamming brakes. The smell of burning rubber. Fear. Frustration. Regret. Even after the car stopped, I couldn’t get out. I craned my neck against the back of the seat, taking breath after pointless breath.

My stomach was in my throat, my heart in a Charlie Watts drum solo. So when I heard, “–Could you give me a ride?”

I was genuinely relieved to hear a voice through the door, and in fact, I practically jumped out of my seat. Peering through the open side window was a woman’s face. Short, cropped black hair

curled over her eyes like a painting. Her pupils were dark, a blackness deeper than the night sky.

It was Minakami Natsuki.

xxx

Why she was walking alone on the highway at midnight remains just as shrouded in mystery as her identity. She said she was just out on a walk, refusing to say anything more. I'd never heard of a young girl taking a stroll on a late-night highway, but I didn't dare pry further. She was a stranger to me, and I was a stranger to her.

"Are you a priest?"

Minakami Natsuki said abruptly, turning off the radio.

"A priest?" I replied.

"Your outfit. That's a priest's outfit, right?"

"Oh. Yeah, that's right. But I'm not a priest. I'm a salesman."

"Do you sell Bibles or something?"

"No."

"Crosses, then?"

"I don't sell crosses, silver bullets or indulgences. I sell water."

"Water?"

"I buy it for a hundred yen a liter and sell it for thirty thousand a bottle."

"Isn't that a total scam?"

"I dunno. You might not believe it, but some people have been saved by this water. I make business trips all the way from Tokyo. I listen sincerely to what people have to say. My car's A/C is shot. I can't afford to buy grass mochi. With that in mind, I don't consider it a scam."

"That's as close to a scam as it gets."

"That's probably a fair assessment."

“This is the first time I’ve ever ridden in a car with someone selling bogus water.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever given a ghost a ride.”

She laughed softly. Silence filled the air. For a while, she stared intently out the window. “The first person I ever had sex with was a Bible salesman.” she murmured. Still gazing into the darkness, she continued.

“He came when I was little and home alone.

‘Are your parents home?’

‘No.’

‘Actually, I’m distributing a book filled with words of wisdom. Do you like books, young lady?’

‘I do.’

‘Then would you mind letting me inside and listening to me for a bit?’

‘Okay.’

It was a hot summer day. And then, we became one… What do you think? Interesting, isn’t it?”

“Did that really happen to you?”

“Of course not.”

Minakami Natsuki laughed heartily. “–The edge of the world.” she said suddenly. “Hey, doesn’t this place feel like it?”

“There’s no such thing,” I said. “If there is one, it’s us. We ourselves are the edge of the world without a fixed point.” I noticed Minakami Natsuki peering intently at me.

“I’ll take you there.” she said softly. “To the edge of the world.”

Minakami Natsuki’s hand reached out into the darkness inside the car–it was still beautiful, her perfect hand, even then–and grasped the steering wheel…

In an instant, the world spun.

The car had lost all control. Me, my car and Minakami Natsuki danced like mad on the Lost Highway, mounted the shoulder, spun several times on the asphalt, and came to an ugly stop.

And when I woke up, I was standing alone in the ‘Red Room.’